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# HOW MUCH OPTIMISM DO WE NEED?

BY CORNELIA JAMES CANNON

## I

As a nation we take such delight in ourselves and our manifest destiny that we strike the uninitiated of other lands as a new species of the genus homo. "How can any creatures that are human be satisfied with such paltry achievements or hopeful about such a rotten world?" their amazed and scandalized eyes seem to question. We have gone sight-seeing through Europe not only contemptuous of the European but with a Gargantuan confidence in ourselves that has made us cartoon material for the world. We have welcomed the European to our shores with hearty superiority, though we have squirmed a bit at his remarks about us. Our amplitude of manner has kept his skepticism in suspense while we made good boast after boast that seemed to him impossible of accomplishment. He has seen miracles of the material world performed before his doubting eyes. The things we cannot do we have refrained from boasting about, not because we have consciously recognized them as beyond our capacities, but because they seemed too unimportant to mention. But the things we can do, we flaunt in the face of an outraged world. During the war the American troops shared with the British Colonials the tribute of an aghast wonder from the Europeans. Never had the European dreamed of such a swagger or of such certainty that the Germans could be annihilated at once if the troops from across the sea were given a free hand and the General Staff locked up while the fight was on. There was something engaging to the war-worn defenders of France in such confidence, but it was clear that an army like this needed to be tempered by the zero hour before it could become a driving power.

But is our optimism anything to be particularly complacent

about? Has it any more intellectual content than the optimism of a baby sucking a bottle?

The European confesses that his basic philosophy is a despair of life, a sense of the futility of human effort or achievement, coupled with an acceptance of the universe; less self-conscious than that of Margaret Fuller to be sure, but doubtless more complete. His beliefs and unbeliefs have penetrated so far below the surface that they are no longer topics for genial conversation. They have become the pattern of his mind, as fundamental to his thinking as the concepts of time and space. To the seasoned European any other attitude is merely that of an inexperienced child or of a shallow nature. The increasing pressure of population, the narrowing horizon of possibilities, the monotony of the anchored life, have been accompanied by the dying down of the certainties and assurances which characterized the savage forbears of the present European when they poured in from the East, energized and palpitant with faith in themselves and their future. On such a substratum of conviction the European carries out his life, finding in religion or dissipation or cynicism or service the illusion of happiness by which he defends himself from the appalling truths of human fate.

But our people are still in the economic status of those savage Asiatic hordes. We are heirs to an under-populated country and the exploiters of a land of unexhausted natural resources. The community booster is the man who had the forest for his saw-mill for the asking; the barker for "God's own country" is the rancher who pastured his sheep on the unfenced foothills of the Rockies; the enthusiast who knows that his town is the greatest little city in the world preëmpted the irrigation water of a thousand farms; and the slogan maker of "America for the Americans" lives fatly on the sale of coal mined by Hunkies. Yet each man thinks the whole secret of his success is his personal and national superiority to the peoples who infest the other parts of the earth.

Fences are serving as the first dim note of the prelude to national modesty. We must have actual physical evidences of our limitations before we can admit them even to ourselves, and the fence serves as well as anything else for a beginning. But until

we are compelled to cultivate the rocky pastures of New England and the great deserts of the West we will not recover from our delirium and see ourselves as we really are. We look at our own abilities through a magnifying glass and those of the rest of the world through the wrong end of a telescope. Those little creatures, carrying on their paltry lives at an indefinitely remote distance, can hardly concern us, preoccupied as we are in our noisy, bustling way with the material activities of the moment. The things of the spirit, which lie obscurely back of the subject of our preoccupation in other lands and in the consciousness of other peoples, are of little interest or significance to us. We look radiantly upon our fertile fields, our rich vineyards, our snow-capped mountains and great rivers, and we almost think we made them. We give the Creator very little credit and would never think of admitting Him to our councils as to the best method of utilizing these natural glories. The lavish giver is apt to have his hand bitten; it is only when the dole is tentatively held out that gratitude enters into the relation or discrimination as to the use of the gift seems to be worth consideration. We found America; we made it what it is; it is ours; blessed be ourselves! There is only one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet. The matter is not open to argument, or even to discussion. To be sure, this is the worst of us; the best of us introduce a higher degree of subtlety into the premises; but the conclusions do not vary greatly.

Of course optimism is like steam pressure in the boiler, it is a source of energy; but if it is the result of reckless firing on the part of the engineer, or is utilized only to blow off the steam gauge, it is waste and not power. We may keep ourselves busy and our digestions functioning happily as a result of our exuberance, though the doctors tell us our circulatory system shows the strain and is already beginning to pay the penalty for a dilated imagination. But is not something else, as basic as the circulation, injuriously affected by living the lives of care-free children in an adult world? And moreover in a world which has just shared with us an experience which might well have shocked us into a sense of the insignificance of national differences in the presence of human likeness? Are our unexhausted resources

evidence of our intrinsic superiority or a mere geographical accident? Though these resources seem unexhausted from the point of view of our national family, from the point of view of a perishing world are they not of right mortgaged to humanity? Are we anything but trustees for the fleeting treasures of the particular geological era in which we find ourselves?

There is an appeal in the coincidence that brings together the rich alluvial accumulation on our plains, the coal and mineral treasures sufficiently upheaved and eroded to allow our little race to pick out or blast them into the light of day, the mechanical devices of this electrical age, the new forms of organizing human society, the new social theories and experiments, the primitive passions of man struggling with new shibboleths, and you and me and our generation plunged into it all to make what we can of the mystery and do what we will with the possibilities. Our day has been long in coming and time will scarcely be at a premium after our day is done, wherefore it behooves us to get the full flavor of the experience while we still have the chance. We do not feel a thrill at the contemplation of our place in the geological sequences, we do not boast of the thermal stage of the sun in this twentieth century, we take no pride in our distance from the glacial period, but we do feel a profound fellowship with those human beings who happen upon the great adventure of life when we do. Of all the billions who have been and who will be in the long ages, these few share it with us; they are our environment, our inspiration, our destruction, as we are theirs. We can never be sufficiently grateful to them for providing such a variety of humanity for our delectation, radicals and conservatives, wise and ignorant, merry and grave, orthodox and free-thinkers, black, white and yellow. Our appreciation of these delicious differences, which strains to the breaking point all our hard-won capacities for tolerance, makes us feel that there is no real piquancy in inflicting any more pain upon our earth-companions than the necessities of living compel.

It might have been pleasant to shake Alexander the Great by the hand (or do him even greater violence), or to catch a glimpse of Cleopatra floating down the Nile under her gleaming canopies, or sit at the feet of Siddhartha, or see Chinese Gordon ride on his

camel out into the Egyptian desert, or look in at the court of Louis XIV, or watch Pasteur give his first anti-rabic inoculation to the stolid Russian peasant; but a sojourner in the twentieth century can have his thrill in meditation on the reactions of Lloyd George, Lenine, Smuts, Hymans, Premier Hughes, and Pilsudski to the tremendous problems that confront this generation. These are our comrades, and yet we can only see them as through a glass darkly until we lay aside some of our easy optimism, until we admit to ourselves that perhaps this is not the best of all possible worlds, that human mastery of fate which recognizes the tragedy of existence is true moral victory, that faith in our destiny based on a good corn crop is an illusion and a snare, and that there may be more in heaven and earth than we have as yet dreamed of in our philosophy. Too long have we been content to fall back on nature's bounty, heedless of the fact that when she fails us, as fail us she surely must, we shall be left without a prop, with nothing between us and our shivering little souls but a memory of ancient glories. And even the memory of skyscrapers and bumper crops will not be very sustaining in the presence of a national realization that we are not the greatest people who ever lived and that we have not made this country the paradise we felt sure it was destined to be.

## II

Culture is not a word we use freely in this country. It smacks of superiority. It is high-brow and effete. It seems to imply that there are differences between human beings, and that some have treasures which others have not. From the point of view of a philosophy of equality this is wholly objectionable. Yet culture is a good word and one we hate to see pushed out of our vocabulary. The only way to preserve it is to be as ruthless with it as the caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland* was with the words he employed. Make culture mean what you want it to mean, not allow yourself to be overborne by its efforts to continue to convey an idea its conservative ancestors left it in their will. So for my personal use culture may be defined as the true appraisal of one's own and humanity's capacities and attainments.

Perhaps this type of culture is undesirable. It may not be worth striving for. Its possession might act like a ball and chain on the ankle of the fervid doer. To be hearty and sure and boastful is certainly more efficacious in the organization of quantity production and the development of gold mines. But to be deprived of the finer insight into motives; to miss the subtle analyses of what constitutes victory and defeat; never to recognize the beneficent diversity in the gifts of man, nor to perceive the delicate overtones of the human orchestra,—is to forfeit completeness as an individual or as a nation. Is the absence of this deeper sense of our human and cosmic relations the fundamental thing our people lack? Is not a culture based on dispassionate analysis of human values eternally beyond the attainment of a nation which persists in seeing a thousand shades of pink as primary red and is color blind to all other hues?

Who that has seen a group of rowdy young people off skylarking has felt anything but distaste for their joy? And yet theirs is a fervor which makes our pallid pleasures seem like the amusements of ghosts. There is a reality about their tumult that carries us back to the exuberant antics of our arboreal ancestors. Does our distaste measure the distance we have come from those jungle days, or is it deplorable evidence of the completeness with which our vital emotions have been bred out of us? A culture of discrimination would certainly tear from us this type of rapture. We would pay the penalty in a more measured happiness and a more present sorrow, but there might be compensations. We might cease to be cheerful in our consciousness of the tragedies of existence, but we would at the same time cease to be complacent about our temporary escape from them. We should be forced to look forward to increased restriction of life and imagination, but we could be learning to do so with dignity, and to prepare those who come after us to do likewise. We could train ourselves to take satisfaction in the vertical rather than the horizontal. We cannot joy forever in the physical presence and the mental exhilaration of boundless acres; we must accustom our feet and trim our imaginations to the twenty by thirty foot plot. One does not need to splash at a ten league canvas with brushes of comet's hair; a study of the atom offers as great an opportunity

for the artist's imagination. It might even be that a reduction of effervescence, a more substantial national consciousness, would give a closer texture to our civilization, and a more subtle quality to our race.

There is a loveliness and attractiveness about optimism and self-confidence and assurance—for a time. Then it becomes tiresome and an affront. The facts of the case are so obviously ignored; the limitations to human capacity and the deeper significances in every situation are so imperfectly grasped. Why be so enthusiastic in the prospect of the population of your town passing the million mark inside of ten years? Why do you want to pass the million mark, anyway? How can one invite so terrible a disaster and then boast of it in addition? No one makes claim that his town has the profoundest religious feeling of all towns in the United States; no city ever announces that it has achieved an atmosphere which will develop more men of genius in a year than any other city of its size in the world; no village posts the fact that a larger proportion of its inhabitants know and love the birds than is true of any other village in the State. We brag about tall steeples, square feet of cement sidewalk, maximums and minimums in temperature, rapidity of railroad construction, plentiful supply of cheap labor, high wages to grave diggers, number of hogs per unit of population, absence of snow, the dryness or rain, number of women blacksmiths in the country, acres of pine turned annually into toothpicks, and we call this orgy of optimism 100% Americanism! If we could grow as eloquent about our conduct toward the negro; our treatment of those whose political theories are different from ours; our racial and religious antagonisms; the indifference of the well-to-do to the state of our public schools; the reckless destruction of our forests; our unconcern about insanitary housing; our industrial accident record; our maternity death-rate; our child-labor totals; our justice meted out to the rich and not to the poor; our casualness about the problem presented by the feeble-minded and the moral imbecile; the burden of fluctuations in industry borne by the wage earner; the recurring tragedy of unemployment; the horrors of prostitution,—we should perhaps not look out upon life so brightly as we do now, but we might more certainly set our



house in order. There is no particular virtue in being cheerful about unimportant things when it distracts us from being determined about important ones.

If our slums are not so bad as those of Europe, it is not because of our booster campaigns but because European slums are older and so smell worse. There is no difference in the determining conditions lying back of both. The disregard of the rights of our fellow men and the blight of self-seeking are the same in the two cases. Our complacency only makes our failure the more shameful, for we might have been forewarned if we had been willing to admit that we had anything to learn from the experience of the old world. If our labor problems are not yet so acute as those of Europe it is not because of any superior innovations in industrial relations that we have devised, but because in a rapidly expanding country labor conditions are sufficiently elastic to allow of internal adjustment. As a matter of fact we shall probably have much more disastrous times than the Europeans, for our boundless hopes do not allow us to admit that there ever could be serious trouble. We shall drift upon the rocks, our eyes blinded by the dazzling rays of the sun we see shining across our path.

Optimism is a mental attitude that drowns out the subtler harmonies and disharmonies of life by its raucous tumult. In its atmosphere it is as impossible to feel the finer distinctions as to sit on the shore with a victrola horn at one's ear and expect to hear what the wild waves are saying. As the color of a star betrays its stage in the stellar cycle, so the intensity of a nation's optimism varies not in relation to the nation's spiritual capacities but inversely as its distance from the beginnings of its national life. In a spirit of optimism we can build railroads and open up new country. Can we as successfully cultivate those rarer fruits of human effort, the sciences and the arts? Shall we sometime attempt to pursue the things of the spirit with the same energy and boundless assurance that we construct skyscrapers and automobiles and sewing machines? And if we do, shall we be able to grasp them, or will they forever elude our eager outstretched hands?

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